

Perceptions of Libyan English Language Teachers towards Teaching the Target Culture

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of 20 Libyan teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Sebha University towards teaching EFL culture inside Libyan EFL classrooms. It seeks to find out whether Libyan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards the use of the target language culture as oppose to the students' first language (L1) or not. In this study, a quantitative approach was used. The participants were asked to give their responses to a total of 7 multiple choice questions on Likert scale. The responses of the participants were analysed using descriptive statistics of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results of the study showed that the majority of the participants hold positive attitudes towards the integration of EFL culture in teaching English language in Libya.

Keywords: attitudes, culture, EFL, English teachers, Libyan

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Introduction

When speakers of the same language interact, they tend to refer to various sociocultural aspects that are common in their society. The term “socio-cultural” (Kramsch, 1996, p. 2) refers to the place an individual belongs to and the social community to which he or she is connected. The sociocultural aspects are so unique that only the people in the same community are able to understand and interpret. All languages work this way and no language is spoken without referring to the cultural context in which it is used. Moreover, when learning any foreign language, culture plays a very significant role in the process of learning that language. Culture is now considered to be one of the elements that are said to be inseparable from language. Culture is reflected through language and language is formed through culture. (Jiang, 2000). Moreover, any foreign language learner, besides the necessity of studying the linguistic aspect of the language, needs a good deal of exposure to that language’s culture in order to be able to speak it appropriately at different situations. Learners’ willingness and enthusiasm to learn the target language as well as have some knowledge about the target environment increases more when they are taught the culture. (Genc & Bada, 2005). This study seeks to explore the perceptions of Libyan EFL teachers regarding teaching EFL culture to their students. It aims to answer the question of whether Libyan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards teaching EFL culture or not.

Literature Review

The cultural component of any speech community is deeply reflected on the language form used by the members of the community. “There is a dialectal relationship between language and culture. Every language is part of a culture and every culture is part of a language.” (Shao, 2006, p.45). This type of relationship has been of a high interest to many scholars who are interested in exploring the role of culture in teaching a foreign language. A great number of scholars have conducted studies to examine the extent into which culture can contribute to the mastering of any language. Ahmed (2011) conducted a study investigating the role of the target culture in language teaching in the secondary Libyan school in Malaysia. Ahmed examined the attitudes of two teachers regarding the integration of the target language culture in their teaching. The results of the interviews with the teachers revealed that the teachers hold positive attitudes towards the target culture; however, in actual teaching situations, the teachers’ attention will be mostly paid to teaching the language alone without its culture. The relationship between language and culture has always been a topic of interest. There exist some views that think that any language can be taught without being tied to its culture. That is, learners of any language can learn how to use that language with no need to get exposed to its culture. (Sardi, 2002). However, some other views suggest that language and culture are inseparable from each other. That is, language cannot be taught without referring to its culture. Only through teaching culture can the language learners be able to make sound inferences about what is being said in different contexts and have a sense of how other cultures differ from their native culture. (Kramsch, 1996). Jiang (2000) conducted a study to explore the relationship between language and culture. To do so, Jiang examined a group of native and non-native teachers of English by giving them a word association survey asking them to write 6 words related to an existing list of 10 words that they can associate with. Jiang’s study concluded that whenever the subjects were asked to give additional words that are related to each word in the list, they referred to words used in their culture. That is, the participants have mentioned items that they were culturally familiar with. Jiang concluded that this shows how language and culture are strongly connected and cannot be isolated from each other. This suggests that speakers tend to be more comfortable using language referring to things they are familiar with. Another study was conducted by Saluveer (2004) in which 61 Estonian teachers were surveyed to examine their opinions regarding the importance of teaching culture, the frequency of integrating cultural issues in their classrooms, the techniques they employ in teaching culture, etc. The participants were asked to answer 10 questions addressing the above aspects. Saluveer found out that despite the positive attitudes that the teachers expressed towards the integration of EFL culture, they stated that they actually did not refer to the target language’s culture all the time. In other words, the importance of teaching EFL culture was not given priority when teaching the language. Another study

was carried out by Sercu et al. (2004) in order to explore the attitudes of 35 EFL teachers towards teaching culture in foreign language's educational context. The participants were given various ranking questions to rank statements pertinent to the objectives of foreign language education and culture. The researchers found out that most of the EFL teachers tend to focus on achieving their educational goals of teaching the foreign language on the linguistic level where the cultural aspect of the language being taught is considered less significant. It is obvious that the studies referred to above all reflect positivity from the participants towards teaching the target language's culture; however, the participants in the above studies reported that when teaching, they tend to focus on the linguistic aspect of the language merely. The learners of any language need to be exposed to the culture of that language in order to learn and practice it along with language. "Closely related to the fact that culture is created and socially constructed is the fact that it is learned. That is, culture is not handed down through our genes, nor is it inherited." (Nieto, 2010, p. 143).

Method

The research method used in this study is a questionnaire comprised of 7 multiple-choice questions employing a 1-4 Likert scale where 1= Strongly Disagree (SD), 2= Disagree, 3= Agree and 4= Strongly Agree (SA). The questions were designed to cover the following aspects:

1. Importance of EFL culture.
2. Students' ability to learn better if their native culture is included.
3. Students' poor language skills can be attributed to little EFL culture knowledge.
4. Students commonly face difficulties in perceiving EFL culture.
5. Students' native culture should be completely excluded from the classroom.
6. The teacher should directly tell the students about the importance of learning EFL culture.
7. Teaching EFL culture has disadvantages.

Participants

A total of 20 male and female Libyan Teachers from the Department of English at Sebha University participated in this study. Teachers' ages ranged between 23-50 years old. The teachers teach different courses at the English Department to undergraduate students. Some of the participants are PhD holders, some are MA holders and some others are Teaching Assistants who teach ESP courses to non-English major students at Sebha University.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the participants individually and at different times. The participants were asked to anonymously answer the questions. The responses of the participants were collected and analysed.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Participants' responses were calculated in numerical forms where each number corresponds to an answer as mentioned in the method section.

The first item in the questionnaire was asking the participants to give their responses regarding the importance of teaching EFL culture (see table 1), the participants' responses to this item varied; All the participants held positive attitudes towards the above statement. About 60 per cent stated that they generally agree with this statement whereas 40 per cent of the participants showed strong agreement about teaching EFL culture meaning that it is very important.

Table 1. Teaching EFL culture is important

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	12	18.2	60.0	60.0
	S.Agree	8	12.1	40.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

As for the possibility for the students to learn better if the culture of their L1 was integrated (See table 2). The majority of the participants (60 per cent) showed positive agreement with the possibility of the students to learn better when their L1 culture is eliminated and some responses (20 per cent) reflected strong agreement among participants towards the above statement; however, 20 per cent of the participants disagreed with this statement.

Table 2. Students learn better by integrating their L1 culture

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	4	6.1	20.0	20.0
	Agree	12	18.2	60.0	80.0
	S.Agree	4	6.1	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

The third item asked the participants to give their responses regarding the connection between students' poor language skills and their little knowledge about the target culture (See table 3). The majority of the participants (45 per cent) agreed that there is a connection and some of them (30 per cent) held strong agreement with the same statement. On the other hand, 25 per cent of the participants did not agree with the above statement which means that they did not think that lack of cultural awareness result in poor language skills.

Table 3. Little target culture knowledge causes poor language skills

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	6	9.1	30.0	30.0
	Agree	9	13.6	45.0	75.0
	S.Agree	5	7.6	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

The fourth item was asking the participants to state their responses regarding the possibility of the students to face any difficulties perceiving EFL culture (See table 4). Participants' responses varied; the majority of the participants (65 per cent) showed positive agreement towards the above statement and a few number of the participants, constituting 25 per cent, held strong agreement with this statement. However, 10 per cent did not agree that students might face difficulties understanding EFL culture.

Table 4. Students face difficulties perceiving EFL culture

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	3.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	13	19.7	65.0	75.0
	S.Agree	5	7.6	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

The fifth item was concerned with the likelihood of the teachers to exclude L1 culture when teaching EFL inside the classroom (See table 5). Most of the participants (75 per cent) disagreed with the above statement meaning that they are against the elimination of L1 culture inside the classroom and 10 per cent of them had a strong attitude against the exclusion of L1 from EFL classrooms. The remaining responses of the participants, representing 15 per cent, agreed that EFL teachers must exclude L1 culture inside the classroom.

Table 5. EFL teachers should exclude L1 culture

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	S.Disagree	2	3.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	15	22.7	75.0	85.0
	Agree	3	4.5	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

In the sixth item the participants were asked to give their responses with regard to the necessity to tell EFL learners directly about the importance of learning EFL culture (See table 6). The majority of the participants (55 per cent) held positive attitude towards the above statement and a great number of them (40 per cent) stressed strong attitudes with the same statement. Only 5 per cent of the participants thought that students need not to be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture.

Table 6. Students must be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	1.5	5.0	5.0
	Agree	11	16.7	55.0	60.0
	S.Agree	8	12.1	40.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

The last item asked whether the participants agree or not that there are disadvantages of teaching EFL culture to Libyan EFL learners (See table 7). Most of the participants (45 per cent) disagreed that there are disadvantages of teaching EFL culture and other 40 per cent held the same attitude against the above statement. However, 15 per cent of the participants had positive agreement with the above statement.

Table 7. There are disadvantages of teaching EFL culture to Libyan EFL learners.

Response		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	S.Disagree	8	12.1	40.0	40.0
	Disagree	9	13.6	45.0	85.0
	Agree	3	4.5	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	30.3	100.0	
Missing	System	46	69.7		
Total		66	100.0		

Discussion

Looking at the results above, it appears that there is a general positivity towards the integration of EFL culture in EFL classrooms. The majority of the participants expressed a willingness to include EFL culture in their language teaching. This indicates that there is an awareness of the importance of including the target language's culture in teaching among Libyan EFL teachers. This general sense of agreement to integrate EFL culture in the classroom goes hand by hand with what other researchers have concluded in their studies on EFL culture. The cultural awareness of the target language is essential because it helps to facilitate communication among interlocutors. (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003, p. 2). Cheng, Yi & Tsai (2009) maintained that to teach the target language's culture, teachers need to be also familiarized with the culture of the language they are teaching and have a good knowledge of what culture is. Clouet (2006) maintained that currently, not all the cultural assumptions and the social settings are being spread by a lot of scholars and teachers and that all they provide learners with is poor tools for communication. Similarly, in order to better understand the culture and use the language properly, learners need to be exposed to the target culture to get familiarized with it. Xiaoyuan (2009) concluded that teaching target language's culture not only allows the learners to have a better understanding of the target culture, but it also enables them to use the language properly without having any misunderstanding or confusion at any given situations which would not be an easy task if the culture was not integrated in language teaching.

This study was an attempt to examine Libyan EFL teachers' perceptions regarding teaching EFL culture. The results obtained from this study provide a clue on the way teaching EFL culture is being looked at by Libyan teachers; however, investigating to which extent EFL culture is being incorporated within Libyan EFL classrooms is another important issue that requires investigation.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of 20 Libyan EFL teachers towards teaching EFL culture. The participants were asked to express their attitudes by responding to 7 multiple choice questions regarding the incorporation of the target culture in their EFL classrooms. The responses of the participants were calculated for analysis. The results showed that Libyan EFL teachers are prone to favour the incorporation of the target culture in the classroom. Most of the participants reflected positive reactions towards the inclusion of culture in language teaching. This shows that Libyan EFL teachers are aware of the importance of teaching the target culture. This awareness allows for a practical involvement of culture along with the language since both language and culture are closely connected and affect each other in various ways. The target language cannot be fully mastered if the cultural component of the language is missing.

About the Author:

Khadeja M. Ahmed: I hold an MA in Linguistics from Florida International University, USA. I currently work as a lecturer at the Department of English, Sebha University, Libya. Research interests include language processing, phonological analysis, foreign language teaching/learning, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Discourse Analysis. I have published a number of articles in different journals.

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AppendixA

Dear Participant,

This is an anonymous survey and your information will be confidential. The purpose of this survey is to examine Libyan EFL teachers' perception of the importance of teaching EFL culture in their classrooms. Your contribution in this survey is voluntary. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey.

Section 1. Demographic Information:

Gender:.....Age:.....Major:.....
.....

Section 2. Please circle the best answer that you think is true.

1. Teaching EFL culture is important.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

2. Students learn better by including L1 culture.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

3. Students' poor language skills could be attributed to little EFL culture knowledge.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

4. It is common that students face difficulties in understanding/perceiving EFL culture:

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

5. EFL teachers should exclude L1 culture from the classroom:

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

6. Students need to be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture:

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree

7. There are disadvantages of teaching EFL culture to Libyan EFL learners

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree